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The B1 Is a Bummer

If the military received the green light and all the money it needed for the B1 and another giant aircraft carrier today, it would be five to six years before we saw the B1 and seven to 10 years before the carrier could respond to an operational order. We are making these budget decisions not for today, but for 10, 20, even 40 years from today. We can't let ourselves be emotionally tied to the past or lack the vision for what we will need militarily from 1985 through 2020—the useful life of these systems. We must have the courage to be bold and act on the hard evidence of where military weaponry is tending. If we are to remain strong and build the kind of military we will need in the coming years, we must begin to modify the kind of aircraft and aircraft carriers we build today in rather dramatic ways.

The manned bomber, be it a B1 or a carrier-based aircraft, is designed to penetrate the enemy's defenses and deliver a weapon close to a target. However, this tactic is being made obsolete today by technology that enables the enemy to better defend against bombers. Satellite sensors can pick up data, which in turn can be rapidly processed and then sent around the world instantaneously by digital data transmission. The result will be near-assured detection of the bomber as it penetrates enemy defenses, the immediate calculation of how to intercept it and the dispatch of smart guided missiles to pursue it relentlessly to destruction.

The technologies we are counting on to help us defend our bombers are lagging way behind. The newly disclosed Stealth technology may extend the aircraft's ability to penetrate. It is too early to judge just what operational applications Stealth will have. But this uncertainty raises the question of whether we would want to use manned penetrating aircraft even if their vulnerability were reduced.

Technical sensors can also be used to detect the targets we want to attack, whether they are fixed or moving. The same processing and data relay can provide that data to a command center far from the battlefield, where it can be evaluated more accurately and more dispassionately than it can by pilots whose missions and skins are on the line. The data flow from the command center can then direct a weapon to be launched from well outside the battle zone and can control that weapon precisely to its target.

It is a long and proud tradition to place a man in an aircraft over the target. But it is a dying tradition, and pride should not stand in the way of doing the job better and more safely. The risks to the pilot are unreasonable, and the probability of hitting the target less than with a remotely controlled system.

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We will still need bombers. But without the requirement for large, complex aircraft that can penetrate sophisticated defenses, a standoff variety can be built smaller and more simply, and we will be able to afford more of them.

The giant aircraft carrier, not only its penetrating bomber, is also a dying breed. At $3.5 billion for one ship—no aircraft—it is too expensive. At 100,000 tons and 1,000 feet in length, it's a sitting duck. With the fleet limited to a total of 12 or 13, they must be carefully rationed, so often they are not where we would like them to be. Like the manned bomber, the trends of technology are all making the giant aircraft carrier obsolete.

The extant cruise missile will permit carrier planes to also stand off and fire at a distant target. The V/STOL, now being used extensively by the Marines and the Soviets, is also a reality. Between the cruise missile, V/STOL and the technology that helps each do its job, the aircraft carrier too can shrink in size and cost, and many more ships can become carriers of at least a few aircraft.

If we proceed with the giant aircraft carrier and the B1 over the years ahead, when the trends of technology are strongly against them, we will find ourselves poorer both in treasure and in defense. We will have neither the funds nor the motivation to pursue the coming alternative systems as vigorously as we must. We will feel safe because, if the chips are ever down, military commanders will withhold carriers from zones of high threat and curtail use of B1s near the big, important, well-defended targets. The dollar cost, the blow to the nation's prestige and the loss to our total military inventory would be just too great to risk losing even one carrier or a few B1s.

Above all, we must avoid becoming embroiled in all the detailed arguments about the qualities of these two systems. Their qualities, as exceptional as they may be, are not bargains if they exceed our needs—if we can do the same job better for less. Our focus must be on the end product. Can they do what needs to be done better than other systems?

The evidence clearly says no. Technologies to defeat the B1 and the supercarrier are outdistancing technologies that can be used to defend them. And new technology offers far better alternatives.

In 1868, the USS Wampanoag was a steam-driven warship that could go twice as fast as any sailing warship afloat, and, because it was propelled by a steam engine, it was not subject to the vagaries of the wind. It surely was a naval tactician's dream. Unfortunately, naval officers did not see it that way. Instinctively, they rejected it as something too revolutionary, decrying its profound differences from ships in use at the time, not its performance. It was averred that if sailors did not have to climb the rigging in wind and storm, they would grow soft and would pale in the face of battle! In 1869, the Navy dropped Wampanoag from the fleet. Another ship of its equal was not commissioned for almost 30 years.

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It took a long time for the country to recognize that the Wampanoag was the wave of the future and that the beloved and battle-tested sailing ship was an anachronism. We cannot today afford to remain sentimentally attached to manned, penetrating bombers and to large ships of any description for their own sake. Both are just too vulnerable, and growing more so by the day.

There is an understandable national concern that we are not keeping up with the Soviets in military competition. We will certainly have to spend more on defense to correct that. But, more important, we must spend it with all the leverage our advanced technological base and our inherent ingenuity will give us.